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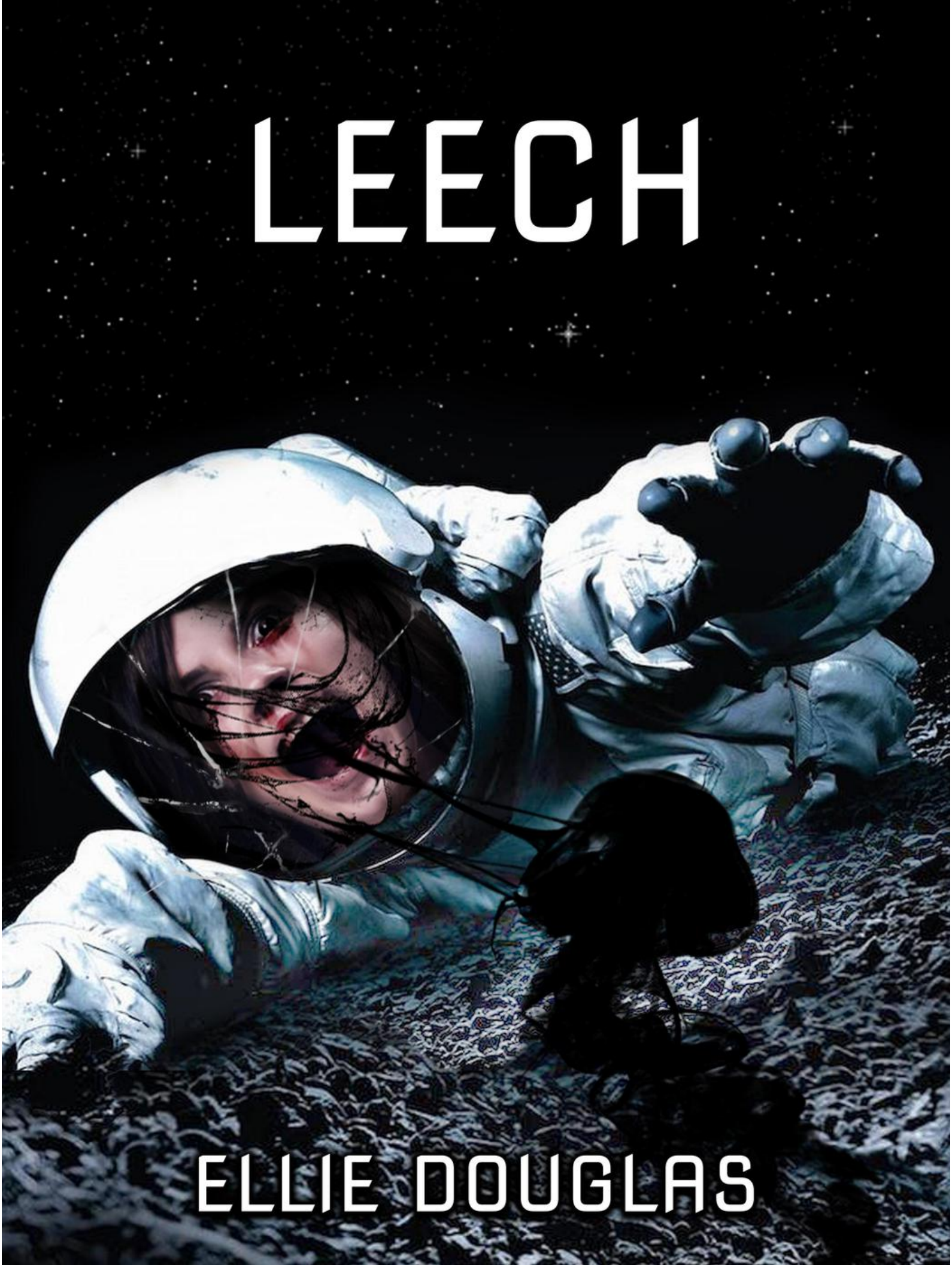

ELLIE DOUGLAS

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3010 - PLANET SOL

It took four days to arrive on planet Sol. Eleven light-years from Earth; the jump into warp-drive was efficient. The air was breathable, and the gravity was almost as high as it was on Earth. It was John Lancaster's 70th trip to Sol and the first time he would be able to see parts of the southeast side of the planet. His team of eighty was divided into smaller explorer teams that were made up of photographers, mappers and graphics, weather watchers, engineers and contractors. John's team would be collecting samples that would be taken back to Earth for testing. His team would also name any new species of fauna, flora, or locations.

Sol was fifty times larger than Earth itself. It would take another thousand trips or more to cover each area and John hoped his request for more teams wouldn't fall on deaf ears this time. He often contemplated an early retirement, missing his daughter growing up was at the forefront of his mind. The two-million-dollar salary he earned on every exploratory mission stopped him from actually quitting. For now, he would accept the little time he got with his wife and daughter and treasure those memories as much as humanly possible.

It was for him, the best of times and certainly the most dangerous too. He was driven by the notion of preparing Sol for colonization and being at the forefront of discovering new species. The threat of any sentient life had already passed. There was none. The only thing he and his team had to worry about was making sure that the planet was indeed habitable for humans and ready for colonization. The soil had been rigorously tested and proved to be filled with an abundance of the right minerals to grow food. The atmosphere was 78% nitrogen, 21% oxygen, and 1% other gasses essential to life, just as it was on Earth.

Over the last 150 years, scientists from all over the world had been testing Sol for everything and had come up with the same answer; that it was almost ready for humans. Before that could happen, John and his team, plus one hundred and twenty other teams, were to scope out every inch of the planet; to take samples, to live and breathe in the oxygen; to do a series of multiple and repeated tasks over and over to ensure it was ready. This was to be one of the last seven missions before ships were to begin transporting the first group of people to colonize Sol. If everything was

approved. It was an exciting time and one John was looking forward to. He couldn't wait to bring Lucy and Alice to the planet and have them settled into what would be one of the first houses built. Cities would go up. Roads would be built. Everything was aimed to be completed by 3035, with work to begin in June. The missions he and his team were assigned to would last the next five years. Five more years away from his family; six to eight months on each trip. He took in a deep breath of air and carried on, shoving his thoughts aside to do the job he was there to do.

Along the southeast side was the planet's ocean, which went around the entire circumference of the planet, yet offered different beaches across the vast locations, without separating the areas by a body of water. The ocean water was a salmon pink rather than green-blue and the foam when the waves broke ashore seemed to dissolve in seconds rather than bubble and remain as it did on Earth. The sun offered fourteen hours of daylight, which was consistent through the entire planet. Two moons; one a light blue, the other would alternate between cream and off white with an orange tint. From observations and data collected over the past six years, they saw five times the number of solar eclipses and noted two high tides per day.

There were clouds that only showed up once a month and from them rain would fall. The water from the rain was drinkable. The grass was stronger and perfect for farming as it was filled with all the nutrients needed. Trees were fused together like conjoined twins. Two in one. They also seemed to grow to one height only, sixteen feet exactly. The coloring of the trees was not green. The wood was a deep rust color. Their leaves were pigmented with purple and turquoise, and the edges were outlined in a deep burnt orange. There was no green on the planet, not even the grass. John found the forests mesmerizing. They were so uniform that it reminded him of the pictures he'd seen of the terracotta soldiers. One thing that stood out was that the species of birds on the planet were sparse. What they did see was rare and he wondered if the birds of the planet had started to become extinct. Further analysis of the planet would be needed. Months of work lay ahead of them for so many different things. It excited him, yet he pined for his wife and daughter with each day that passed.

John and his team noticed that the southeast had 30% more foliage and a range of animals they hadn't seen before. In the mountains, goats with two tails roamed free. Mountain lions, the size of full-grown zebras, hunted

the goats. The standout for John was that they had only one eye. They quickly got the nickname of rocky-cyclops.

Under observation, they found out that there was also an additional source of food for them at the bottom of the mountain in the forest. Wild boars were in the thousands. Once again, these boars varied from the ones back on Earth. So much so, they gave John nightmares. They had thick tusks that curled outward, then wrapped around themselves at the top of their heads. Each one sported two incisor teeth that were the size and shape of a saber-tooth tiger's tooth and projected from their wide, elongated mouths. They were found to be extremely docile, making them an easy target for the rocky-cyclops to devour.

Butterflies were in abundance and looked like a cross between a dragonfly and butterfly. Each one a vibrant purple and outlined in deep-sea blue, and all of them glowed in the dark like flying fairy lights. It fascinated the team.

Two days before they were due to leave the planet, the team followed a meteor shower that entered the atmosphere and rained down five miles from where they were. The hike out proved invaluable as they stumbled upon an unusual type of fish that could live both on land and in water. Much like the walking catfish on Earth, these 'land fish' crawled between the three lakes which spanned an area about the size of Manhattan. Each of the lakes were side by side and were only separated by a patch of grass 1.5 miles wide. Each lake was of a teal coloring, with a tinge of cornflower blue that was darker at the edges. The land fish, they nicknamed 'Crocuna', based on how they looked like an undersized tuna, and that they had the same kind of legs at the back like a crocodile. Their front legs were thinner but longer than their back legs. Their coloring all over was a pale red. The gills of the fish opened like sunflowers when they were out of the water, and when they were in the water, they became flush against their skin. John and his team wanted to study them further in the future.

When they reached the area of where the meteor shower landed it was covered with black rocks. They didn't think anything of it. There was little damage to the foliage and ground. John took one of the little rocks, and turned it over in his hand, inspecting it. It felt solid. It looked like any other bit of rock and he thought to himself how perfect it would be for his daughter Lucy, who had been begging him for a long time to bring something back from space for her. He pocketed one and they carried on. A

team of scientists were headed to the same area for further sampling of the meteorites and surrounding foliage.

John's most memorable experience on this trip was his and the team's discovery of a valley of glowing plants which floated on a mirrored lake. It was the most majestic thing they had ever seen. The plants were shaped like upturned umbrellas. The colors were a vibrant sun- orange which shimmered with a white outline that held a fiery red center. They hovered on the surface above the lake seemingly dance-like; no sounds were heard. It was the most peaceful part of the planet they had discovered. Samples were taken from the lake. Several of the plants were bottled.

The very next morning they were scheduled to fly back to Earth for much-needed supplies. Nine of them, including John, were making the trip back home. The rest of the team were staying on Sol. The discoveries they had made needed to be reported, and samples had to be handed over to be analyzed. With plans to return to Sol two days after they landed back on Earth, John knew it wasn't going to be enough time to see Alice and Lucy. Two weeks ago, Alice informed him via his commlink that she had to leave immediately for Australia. Her mother had experienced a heart attack. She took Lucy and they weren't expected back in time to see him during his short layover on Earth to resupply. It completely disheartened John, but he knew in six more months he'd be home to see them. With that in mind, he prepared his team for the flight back to Earth.

Back on Earth

Nico grabbed at the rock. “John, what is that you keep playing with?”

Moving stealthily out of Nico’s reach, John looked as if he had stepped out of a myth from long ago. He was like a towering, bronze statue that breathed, walked, talked, and gave commands. At six feet, six inches, he toyed with Nico, juggling the rock from one large palm to the other without dropping it. His facial features didn’t change. He watched Nico in a playful yet authoritative manner. He carried himself like the captain he was.

“I just want to look at it.” Nico insisted, as he reached for the rock while it gently passed between John’s hands. No matter how close he thought he was, he still missed by several inches. Second-in-Command Nico Farone stood five feet, eleven inches tall. He was still wearing his NASA overalls; they were bright white with blue stitching down the sides and a blue logo on the chest with his name and rank. He gave up trying to get a look at the rock and started off.

“You give up too soon,” chuffed John.

“Well, I wouldn’t say give up. It’s more like I’m letting you win,” Nico retorted, with a quiet laugh.

“You keep telling yourself that. Whatever helps you sleep at night.” John tossed the rock at Nico as he walked away, accidentally/on purpose hitting him in the head.

“What the hell?” Nico rubbed at the back of his head. His eyes meet John’s briefly, and he gave him a scathing look. He then looked down at the polished, wooden floor of the bunker where the rock lay broken in two. Something spilled out of the center of it as he bent to pick it up, a kind of black goo which drizzled all over his fingers. He turned the stone in his hand. There was a nonagon, hollow shape in the middle, which expanded towards the edge. It was a deep, hunter-green color on the outside, with a darker shade of green forming closer to the middle. In the center, where the black goo originated, was a glowing white aura around it in a squiggly pattern. He felt a sharp prick to his index finger when it accidentally slipped into the cavity. He grimaced at the muck. The stuff inside leaked out over his digits, but his hand was completely dry.

“You didn’t have to throw it at me. You broke it.” He held out his hand. “Strangest damn thing... It had a liquid center. It was leaking, but now it’s

not...”

“Gee, your head must be made of steel. By the way, would you believe I was aiming for your ass?”

“You aren’t funny. You know that, right? Besides, what’s so special about this weird rock?” Nico quizzed, while staring at it. He handed it back to John, puzzled by the substance that had completely vanished. It looked like any other black bit of rock on the outside. It felt the same in weight to any other rock and had no distinct markings. Except when it broke in half and bled out like gummy sap from a tree.

“I picked it up from Sol for Lucy. She begged me to bring something back from outer space. I guess now she’ll get two halves. I’m kind of glad it broke, it looks like a fossil of some kind of plant with nine sides inside. Those colors are going to be the winner for Lucy. You did me a favor, or I should say, your head did!” John snickered, then noticed that Pete was about to leave. “Pete, come here.”

“Yes, Captain?” Pete replied, as he crossed the room to John’s side.

John took out a plain wooden box and put the two halves of the rock inside. “See to it that Lucy receives this, once we are in orbit.” John handed Pete the box and a sealed letter he had written earlier addressed to his wife, Alice.

“You got it, sir.” Pete went to his own quarters in the barracks, tucked the sealed letter and box inside a knapsack, and stored it at the end of his bed. It would be his first delivery in the morning.

John casually stripped off his overalls and climbed onto the top bunk. He sat on the edge in his boxers. Hanging around his neck was a thick, silver locket. He opened it up. On one side was a picture of his wife, Alice, and the other side his seven-year-old daughter, Lucy. He gave each of them a kiss and said goodnight.

Nico didn’t feel tired. Instead, he had his own ritual; one that would see him leave the barracks on a mission to eat as much real food as he could before a flight into space. Nico hated the mashed, pureed food that they had to consume for far too many months. So, his own personal mission on Earth was to stuff his face. Given the hour, he only had a few options. The closest was McDonald's. Nico knew that eating heavy meals like that could make him sick on the flight, but he always pushed reason aside to feed his gut.

The next morning found the crew on route to Sol.

On Board the USS Genesis

“Why the heck didn’t you stop eating crap before the flight?” grumbled, First-in-Command Roger King. He moved as far away from Nico as he could.

Nico held his belly tightly while answering Roger. “I didn’t do anything differently. Maybe I ate something bad. Whatever is making me this sick, it ain’t the food.”

They had only been in orbit two hours when a blaring alarm was booming around the control room.

“Proximity alert!” John’s tense voice came from behind Roger as he braced himself against his captain’s chair before sitting down and buckling himself in.

First Mate Bridgette Stiner was already yelling orders back to the ship’s computer, Athena.

“Source?”

“A massive asteroid storm.” Athena’s voice was calm and serenely artificial. It echoed through the control room.

“ETA?” John asked, while preparing for the worst.

“Now,” was all Athena offered in response.

First Mate Stiner punched in a series of commands on the panel in front of her. She took a quick glance through the large window and could see a rock, the size of a house, headed straight for them. After a pregnant pause, Bridgette’s wide-eyed gaze broke from the window and she yelled, “Hang on to something!”

Roger was madly tapping at the keyboard and yelling commands to Athena. The ship suddenly dipped and tilted sideways. An ear-shattering crash rocked the craft, throwing it off course. The force of many smaller rocks hitting the ship sent everything that wasn’t strapped down into a turbulent spin before dropping heavily to the floor in the artificial gravity. The powerful force hurtled Nico against the bridge door. The impact stole his breath away. He managed to right himself, only to bend over and paint the floor in vomit.

Bridgette and Roger brought the ship back into a level trajectory.

“D-deck has a breach and there is a fire in the engine room,” Athena said. “Two of the air hoses in the cargo bay have ruptured.”

“I’m on it, Captain,” Bridgette called out, rushing to the cargo bay.

“Travis, you take the engine room,” Roger said, leaving the bridge. “I got D-deck. I’ll pick Lucas up on the way.”

John turned sharply at the sound of thick liquid hitting the ship’s polished floor again. His eyes rolled backward, and he grimaced, then quickly turned back to face the window overlooking the galaxy.

Nico couldn’t stop vomiting while he held tightly to his stomach with one hand and his other braced his wavering, unbalanced body on the bridge’s wall. His forehead glistened with a sheen of sweat, and his otherwise tanned skin was turning ghostly white.

“Someone get him to the med bay,” John ordered.

Sam, one of the ship’s communications systems technicians, escorted Nico out. He had to carry him to Medical. Once there, Sam left him on a cot with instructions that Liam wouldn’t be far away. Shortly after, Doc Liam Hodges arrived and he examined Nico.

“So, Doc, what the hell is wrong with me?” asked Nico, through bouts of nausea.

“With your symptoms, I’d say you have gallstones.”

“And? How do we fix that?”

“Well, we’ll hope this passes without needing surgery,” Liam said. “You are going to be pretty miserable for a while until you either pass the stones or they move from their position blocking your duct. And in the future, stop eating fatty foods. That contributes to the problem. Rest here for the time being.” Liam nonchalantly dipped his hand into his white coat pocket, and picked at a loose thread.

“Doc?”

Liam turned his hazel eyes at Nico, giving him his full attention.

“Listen to me. It doesn’t feel like gallstones, man. This feels different. Even my flippin’ ears are on fire. Everything feels hot.”

The doctor walked to a set of stainless-steel drawers and opened one. He pulled out a thermometer and hummed to the tune of ‘Home on the Range’ while he took Nico’s temperature. He abruptly stopped humming. Liam reset the thermometer and took Nico’s temperature again. He got the same result. 107.9 Fahrenheit.

“Seems you are running a fever,” Hodges said, while putting the thermometer back. He walked to the same bench, but this time opened a

glass cabinet above it and took out some pills. He grabbed a water bladder from the small glass fridge and gave them both to Nico.

"Just rest. I'll come back and check on you in an hour." The doctor put the rest of the pills away and left the sickbay.

Nico nodded. Even that was unbearable. His mind felt like a prison. His vision blurred as the pain intensified throughout his body. The pills did little to help.

The storm had fully passed, and John waited for Athena to report in with an updated damage assessment.

"Systems check," Athena said. "The fire is out, but it has damaged part of one engine and is dumping fuel from another. We have been knocked off course by 18,000 feet."

John leaned back in his seat and looked out the window. Despite the violent storm that had just passed, the galaxy looked beautiful once again, like a bag of diamonds tossed onto black velvet. Everything glistened with brilliant, various colored sparkles. His thoughts were interrupted when Lucas's voice hissed over the radio.

"All clear here. We're heading to the engine room." Before he could say any more the intercom died again.

John briefly wondered if Sam would have time to fix the intercom system. It had been erratically turning on and off. John unbuckled his belt and stepped out of his chair.

First Mate Bridgette Stiner returned, soot-covered and smiling.

"What are you smiling about?"

"We're alive. That always makes me smile."

"We're off course, stuck in space without warp drive and we're leaking fuel. Yet here you are smiling? I admire your optimism, as weird as it is."

"One of us has to," Bridgette said, with a hint of sarcasm. "If I let all the worries that you have on your shoulders consume me the way they do you, I'd be a blubbering mess on the floor." She sat down, flicked a few switches, and put Athena in full charge of the craft, freeing John from piloting the ship.

Bridgette turned her chair to face Roger when he returned. "I need a coffee. Maybe some food too, depends on what Paul is cooking. You need it too, by the looks of you. Are you coming?"

"Yeah, sure," Roger answered. "What about you, John?"

"No. I'll stay here for a bit longer."

“Lucas and Travis have everything under control in the engine room,” Roger informed John.

“So, Captain, you coming?” Bridgette stretched her long legs before rising to follow Roger out.

John looked up from the floor and made eye contact with her. “Not this time, Bridgette. Maybe a little later.”

Bridgette and Roger headed for the breakroom. The maze of corridors were painted white and had a clinical feel to them. Bright lights led the way. They walked in silence, the only noise was the soft humming of the ship and the echo of their boots. In the breakroom, Paul was busying himself in the kitchen area.

“What’s on the menu, Paul?” Bridgette asked.

“Well, you have a choice. Pureed beef strips with carrots and peas, or pureed pork and rice.” Paul winked at Bridgette before removing his chef’s hat, revealing oily, thinning, dark-blonde hair. Bridgette watched in disgust as Paul ran his hand through it before putting his chef’s hat back on.

“Wink at me again and I’ll remove your eye with my spoon,” Bridgette said, snatching a tray of food and coffee from Paul. She then walked backward toward a chair so that Paul was still in her sights. She slowly unwound her middle finger and flipped him off before turning and taking her seat.

“I love it when you speak dirty to me,” Paul said, while rubbing his hands across his apron, then handing Roger a tray of food. Roger looked down at the meal and instantly lost his appetite. The look of the pureed beef reminded him of Nico’s puke.

“Paul, there is a pile of sloppy, regurgitated crap on the floor of the control room. You know the drill,” he said, after taking a seat beside Bridgette.

“Sure, great, get the cook to clean up vomit. I might just scoop some of it up and serve y’all later,” Paul retorted, with a laugh. He grabbed a mop and bucket and exited the kitchen.

“God, he’s such an idiot. He is a womanizing, sleazy, disrespectful turd. He has absolutely no respect for rules regarding sexual harassment in the workplace.” Bridgette said.

“He is and has always been that way,” Roger said. “You’re the only woman member of our team, I’m not saying it should happen. I’m just saying his flirting is innocent. I think if you didn’t bite back, he’d leave you

alone. Wouldn't you agree?" Roger looked Bridgette up and down before fixing his eyes on hers.

"Yeah, well... he's been trying on every damn flight. He won't be getting into my pants. He just isn't my type."

"*Really,* Bridgette? You have to know at some point he isn't serious. He's just messing with you."

"All the same, I don't like it. I've never liked it. He never just backs off. I'm so over his behavior and if it doesn't stop, I will report him."

"Gee, you aren't normally this sensitive. I overheard you giving John a pep-talk ten minutes ago. You were so upbeat in the control room. What happened to that strong, optimistic woman who got me to take a break? Don't take this the wrong way, but you can tell me... is it that time of the month again, huh?" Roger leaned in with both elbows resting on the table. He was inches from her face.

Bridgette shot out of her seat faster than Roger could blink. He flinched when he saw her fisted hand rise up, but not before taking a shot to the back of the head.

"Well now, I have to say you hit more like a man," Roger said, rubbing the back of his head gingerly. His face kept a gloat on it that Bridgette did not find funny. She growled at him like an angry dog. "You're pathetic and give men a bad name!" She picked up her tray of food and stormed out of the room. She knocked elbows with Paul as he was returning to collect his cloth and disinfectant spray.

"What's ya hurry, hot stuff?" Paul asked, as he narrowed his beady eyes toward her breasts.

Bridgette stopped abruptly, swiveled on her heels, and faced Paul. He rested the bucket on the floor and leaned the mop against the wall. He stuck out his tongue and flicked it back and forth while gyrating his hips. That was enough to rile Bridgette. She hurled her tray of food at him. He ducked out of the way and the tray bounced off the wall and onto the bucket before crashing by his feet. The remaining food went flying in all directions. In shock, he watched her storm off.

"You should see your face," Roger said, as he walked by, carefully stepping over the spilled food.

Paul could hear him laughing even after he'd left the breakroom. "That little witch. She could have taken my goddamned eye out," Paul said, aloud to himself, while he cleaned up the mess. He grumbled and moaned about

it. “She must really love me,” he laughed until tears rolled from his eyes. “Yep, she really loves me.”

The Beginning of the End

Sam Garnet, was an ugly man with a crooked nose and thick arms that bulged from beneath his overalls. He stood five feet, seven inches and had the body of a weightlifter: thick like an old transport ship. Which helped him greatly to get Nico to Medical, by himself. When Nico couldn't walk Sam effortlessly carried him. When he got him there, he left him on a cot and didn't think twice about where Doc was.

"Liam shouldn't be too far away. You'll be good here, Nico." Sam said, as he exited Medical.

Not long after Sam left, Liam arrived and assessed Nico. He gave him some pills with instructions that he would return in an hour. Shortly after he left, Nico stumbled off the cot with severe stomach cramps and headed straight for the bathroom. His gut erupted like a volcano with potent flatulence, followed by a bout of diarrhea and more vomiting. He picked himself up, but his body stayed bent forward with the pain. He was left to do a standing crab crawl. Nico practically crawled out of the bathroom and back to the cot. His body ached everywhere. His condition went from bad to worse as it turned into a series of convulsions in response to the discomfort that seemed to attack his joints, heart, brain, and muscles. Every single inch of him screamed in agony. He felt as though his insides were disintegrating. His eyes frantically searched the open space of the med bay for the doctor.

Until now, Nico had never noticed the ship's engine noise, or the ventilation system, or any of the noises that surrounded him. Now, they alarmed him as they sounded louder than ever before. He grew more irritable, scared, and confused with each passing minute. He started to hallucinate. First, he saw himself as a young boy kicking up stones in the school car park. Those stones grew bigger until they were the size of the tallest mountains. With gnarly teeth, like giant stalactites, in an enormous mouth that opened wide and started to eat him. He could feel the gnashing of his bones. He wanted to scream, but his voice was no longer there. He blinked rapidly, trying to rid himself of the visions only to be taken into another hallucination. He could see and hear his parents arguing; they suddenly turned to ash right before his eyes. He felt dust particles hit his body like shards of glass. Uncomprehending what had happened to his parents, he blamed himself, opened his father's alcohol cabinet, and took

out the vodka bottle. After removing the lid, he put it to his lips only to be sucked inside the bottle. He felt his body slamming into the glass and being drenched in vodka. He tried to swim to the top, but the bottle neck kept closing in and he saw himself slowly drowning. He squeezed his eyes tightly and was taken to another memory of his younger years. He remembered stealing money from his mother to get a serpent tattoo on his right forearm. Just after the tattooist inked him, the snake came alive, coiling around his midsection. Then creeping slowly up toward his face. He could see the outline of its powerful jaws as it flicked its tongue inches from his nose, before it dove into his mouth. He could feel his throat tighten until he was choking. He coughed and spat out what he thought was the snake.

He was suddenly thrown into another memory, something darker, more hellish. He saw himself free-falling from a high cliff, when a powerful, jerking motion pulled him back. He felt the chute behind him. He landed in unknown territory of some planet he'd never been on, right into the middle of an alien battle. They were using peculiar guns, unlike anything he'd ever seen before. He could hear the shouting and feel the fire of those powerful weapons. Suddenly, he looked down and saw a hole in his chest the size of a bowling ball. He didn't feel any pain. There was no blood, no organs; nothing but an empty hole. He shook and fell off the cot onto the cold steel floor.

His eyes betrayed him as he opened them and saw a tall figure looming over him. He blinked, and the thing was gone. He opened his mouth to scream. A dark, thick substance spewed out and dropped to the floor, slithering away. He no longer knew what was real and what was a nightmare. Nico moaned and grabbed at his head. His brain felt as though it was being dipped into a fat fryer. When he lowered his hands, he freaked. His palms were covered in handfuls of his hair tangled between his fingers. He took a few steps toward the polished silver counter and looked down to see his reflection. A scream bubbled up in his throat. The skin on his face had turned to a waxy consistency, like a melting candle. But his flesh felt taut as though it were being stretched. He felt as though his body was readying itself for something.

His eyes had changed color, from blue to almost red, and his once full head of auburn hair had almost vanished, leaving a few wisps dangling from his aching scalp. His eyes blinked in rapid succession and he looked

harder at his new image, studying himself with uncertainty and shock. Then his eyes traveled back to the bed. His hair lay plastered all over the pillow.

Nico let out another scream, this time long, loud, and inhuman. Liam had returned to check on him. He hadn't heard Nico's screams until he opened the door, then it was like a slap in the face. He almost tripped on his own feet as he hurriedly exited, locking the abomination that used to be Nico in his room. Nico charged at the door and slammed a hand on the glass. His delicate skin erupted when it hit the glass, leaving smears of blood. His eyes met Liam's, who watched from the safety of the door between them. Liam was stunned at Nico's transformation. He noted how his skin had become so tight that it looked almost translucent and ready to split. He also noticed how drenched in sweat Nico was and the discoloring of his entire body, and the loss of hair.

"What the heck, man? Let me out!" Nico didn't even recognize his voice. It sounded like he was talking through some kind of voice changer. Ignoring it, he continued to pound on the door and yell at the doctor.

Liam pushed a button beside the door and spoke into the intercom. "I can't hear you. You have to push the button if you want to talk. Nico, I'm sorry, you might be contagious. I need my suit. Try to stay calm. I'll be right back." Liam sounded an alarm and waited farther along the wide corridor out of sight from Nico. Liam could feel his nerves taking over and felt an episode of anxiety fast approaching. He leaned against the wall, crossed his feet at the ankles and anxiously waited. He wasn't sure what was happening, being a medical research scientist, he was used to cleaning cuts and stitching, mending broken bones and administering pills. He wasn't equipped to handle whatever Nico had, and it terrified him. He uncrossed his ankles and made his way to the sickbay to observe Nico. He froze at the sight before him.

Nico didn't believe the doctor, not when he saw the hazmat suits hanging on the hooks in the far corner of the room. He grew angrier and threw his hands to his aching head before falling to his knees screaming in pain. As if it accompanied the pain in his head, his skin in various places started to rupture into holes the size of matchboxes. Nico looked down at his arms, legs, and stomach, and watched in horror as thick, sharp black stumps began growing out of those holes. He rubbed his fingers over one and sliced the tips deeply.

Nico was frantic with fear. He felt every one of those black things push their way out of his body, leaving behind a slimy substance. He watched as each of the dark inky things sprang to life, just like the thing that slithered out of his mouth. They moved fast and with purpose, scurrying up the walls and vanishing into the ventilation vents. He counted at least eight. Nico had no idea what they were, or how they moved with no visible feet or eyes.

Suddenly, his body convulsed in agony and jolted violently as though he was being stunned with a stun gun. He screamed out in pain. He could barely sustain a single breath. He felt as if he was dying. Nico's eyes began to shut, and he took one last breath. He keeled over, face-planting on the cold steel floor. Blood pooled under his lifeless, deformed body.

Doctor Liam stared in disbelief. He had not had a panic attack in five years. He felt one fast approaching, furthering his anxieties. He hummed a tune to himself and tapped his feet in uncoordinated and erratic steps. He had to do everything to keep from having a panic attack. His legs shook. His heart raced. His hands grew sweaty and he could feel his mouth drying up. The tapping and humming helped to keep him calm. He hadn't seen the creatures, but he could see Nico's body had erupted into a patchwork of bloody holes. John appeared at his side. The alarm went silent.

"What the hell happened? Doc!" When Liam did not respond, John shook him. "Dammit, are you even listening to me?" John snapped.

Liam felt his entire body shake, he quickly gave his attention to John, "Yes... Sorry... I... I... I don't have any answers for you, man. I've never seen this before."

John looked through the glass at the prone figure of Nico on the floor, blood oozing across the steel below him. "Dear God... What's going on? We need to get in there and help him."

"We can't," Liam said. "He's already dead. Besides, he might be contagious!"

"What do you mean dead? How? Why? What the hell, Liam, can't you get in there and find out?"

"John, you know my medical limitations. I'm not the right person to be asking this. I'm only able to speculate until I can do some research."

"If you can't get in there, how do you know he's actually dead?" John pressed his face to the glass and stared in disbelief. He could feel throbbing in his neck.

Liam clasped his hands behind his back and lifted his head. “I’ve seen enough dead bodies to know when someone’s dead. That much I can confirm. Whatever happened to him has killed him. Painfully.”

“What do you think it could be?” John felt his hands ball into tight fists, he wanted to hit something. He breathed faster, fogging up the window. He looked at Liam with an expression of pain and anger.

“At this point, I would say at a guess that he has picked up some kind of alien host. Almost like a leech.”

“Based on what?” John said, sternly, not wanting to believe an alien did this to his best friend.

“Well, the skin eruptions, for one. The fact that it happened extremely fast. At first, I thought it was gallstones, but what you see there sure as hell isn’t gallstones. The holes in his skin also point to an alien. All that hair loss. The discoloration of his skin.”

“Start at the beginning, what exactly did you see, Liam?”

“When I left him, he had a high fever and severe stomach cramps. He had diarrhea and vomiting. All symptoms of gallstones. I left the room and when I returned, he was highly aggressive. I’ve never seen him angry before, not ever, and to see him pounding on the glass like a gorilla. He was incapable of talking normally. It really took me by surprise. He then collapsed and stopped moving.”

“You’re right, he was never the angry sort. Dammit! He was a good man. One of the best. To see this happen to him is beyond awful. In your professional opinion, do you think the alien is still inside him or running loose on the ship? I need more information. I’ll let the CDC know. In the meantime, if you can get in the room and take some samples it will help.”

“I don’t know. I mean, it could still be inside of him. What if it enters me? I can’t just go in there and examine him. The thing is, John, both you and I know that no regular illness would have done that to Nico. Something extraterrestrial is responsible. It is the only logical reasoning. For that reason alone, I do not want to go in that room until I see from the safety of this glass door that there is nothing hostile in there.” Liam shoved his hands into his coat pockets and twisted every loose fiber he could.

John let out an exasperated sigh. “Wait here,” John said, as he went to the hanger bay and pulled off one of the spacesuits. Then he ran to the armory and returned a few minutes later with a pulse-rifle. He pulled the suit on, and turned to Liam. “Open the door.” Liam put his palm on the

panel and the door gave a hiss and then opened. When John was inside, Liam closed the door and with adrenaline pumping through him, he felt very jumpy. He watched with wide eyes.

John got as close as he felt comfortable to Nico's body. After eyeballing him for a few minutes, he got onto his knees and turned Nico's body over. He gasped, fogging up his helmet. Nico's face was pulled so tight that John could see his bones. He turned his eyes away and scanned the rest of the body. Noting the dark, black, gooey stuff that splattered in blotches on and near his corpse. He saw no evidence of anything alien. He got to his feet and looked around the room. Opening cupboards. Checking in every corner and over every inch of the room. The room was clear. He noticed the hazmat suits on hangers to the right of the wall. He walked over and removed one and then made his way out. Liam opened the doors for him and then as soon as John was out, Liam locked the doors closed again.

"What did you find?" Liam asked, nervously.

"Nothing. I think whatever killed him is still inside of him or dead. There is nothing in that room except for some dark-looking stuff near his body. Get samples of that straight away."

With a stern grip on top of Liam's shoulders, John suppressed his frustrations with focus. "Try not to stress. We're all running a marathon of problem-solving. Compose yourself and get the job done."

Liam rubbed his eyes and gazed dolefully at John. "But this! A friend has died. Horribly! I just need a moment to collect my thoughts."

"We all need a moment," John said. "One we can't have right now. Once you are inside, see if you can determine a cause of death. We do need something definite before we announce it to the rest of the crew. I'll inform everyone that Nico has died, but we won't say how, not until we can piece together a cause."

"Sounds good to me. Thanks, John."

Liam was in the middle of putting the hazmat suit on, but halted when John added, "If you need me, you'll have to come to the control room. The intercom system isn't working. Sam was meant to fix it, but he's been sidetracked with other duties."

Liam nodded and fastened himself into the hazmat suit. Then he put the helmet on, unlocked the door and entered. He headed for the long, stainless-steel bench, pulled open a drawer, and took out six vials and a syringe. He

went over to Nico and bent down to inspect him. Liam had to hold back the vomit that was fast rising. He swallowed hard and blinked several times.

He sat down next to Nico's body. He wondered what were those cavities that split Nico's skin into sections as though he was being readied for the butcher. He felt his heart race and his left eye started to twitch. The idea that an alien was inside Nico was freaking him out, made worse with the possibility it had escaped and was now somewhere else. In the room with him. Liam glanced hesitantly around the room, his eyes darted left, then right, then repeated as the twitch in his eye grew more intense. He paused to gather himself. He closed his eyes tightly, struggling to control his rapid breathing before he hyperventilated. A few moments passed before he got up the courage to pick up Nico's arm. When he did, he pushed in the syringe. As he was drawing blood, he couldn't help but notice the difference in color. Instead of it being red, it was almost black. It was also thicker and slower to draw. He used an eyedropper to suck up some of the black goo and transferred that into a sterilized glass tube. After he finished, he got up and stored all the samples he took inside his chest pocket, while making his way to the door.

Once outside, he tore off the helmet and breathed in the artificial air. Liam felt the cooler air and immediately felt more relaxed. He unzipped his hazmat suit, peeled himself out of the arms, and tied the sleeves around his waist. He realized he had forgotten his samples and quickly untied the sleeves and retrieved the syringe and vials.

He stood facing the med bay, his feet started to tap, and he could feel his legs turning to jelly. He drew a deep breath, released it and repeated until he had pacified himself enough to suit back up. He unlocked the door and went back in. He put the collected blood into a quarantined space of the fridge and started collecting the other samples. He worked fast and hard; he didn't want to be in there longer than he had to. Once he was done, he grabbed a sterile body bag and put Nico's body into it. He hoisted him up onto a gurney. Then he fumigated the lab with a special vent that poured a sterilizing vapor into the room. When it was all completed, he felt safe enough to remove the suit. With sweaty hands, he took off the helmet and unzipped the suit, pulling it off his arms and tying the sleeves around his torso. He put on disposable gloves and wasted no time in his investigation. Comparing what he had already with the data on the computer. Almost two

hours later, he was so deep in his analyzing that he didn't hear John entering.

"Doc, what'd you find out?"

"It will take another couple of hours to run the tests for a definitive answer. What I have discovered in the last ninety minutes is odd, because I have no idea how Nico would have come into contact with it."

"With what?"

"Years ago, there was a report of an alien substance found in rock formations on a planet called Tridentol. The stuff reported is similar to the black gunk I found on Nico's body and on the floor. In the article I just finished reading, it is describing an almost identical situation."

John felt a tightness in his lower gut. His mind filled with an unexpected fear. "What happened?"

"This organism acts as a living parasite within a host and multiplies. A kind of parasitic leech. Once it has drained the host of its nutrients, it abandons the host in search of another. The first host it inhabits takes roughly 12 to 16 hours before it exits. The second takes two to three hours, then the third host is an hour if not less. At which stage it has grown and no longer requires a host."

John thought back to the rock that he had shown Nico earlier; the very one that had broken when it hit Nico's head. He felt consumed with guilt. He fought a conversation with himself over the rock and started to blame himself for Nico's death.

"Doc, is it the actual rock that is alien or something else? Would the rock infect everyone it came into contact with, or can some be immune somehow to it?"

"From the little research I have done so far, it appears that something within the rock is the source of the alien. The rock itself seems to be just an incubator. As for infecting everyone that it contacts, yes, theoretically if they were to come into contact with the stuff inside of it. If the rock is empty, then no, you'd not be infected. I'd have to go back and read the reports to make sure. Why?"

John's voice started to tremble. "So, it can infect one person, but not another. Is that what you're saying?"

"Again, yes. I guess that is possible, but I need to do more research." Liam fiddled with his jacket pockets, and gazed down, then slowly he raised his eyes to meet John's. "The thing is John, what scares the hell out

of me the most is if it did not die inside of Nico then we are looking at a quarantine situation here. They won't let us dock back on Earth or Sol for that matter. I don't have the equipment here to know if that black stuff is just dead waste or if it was the extraterrestrial's placenta of sorts."

John clenched his jaw and released it with a frustrated sigh. "Bugger! Do that research as fast as you can. I need to know. I think I know where Nico made contact with this stuff. Here, do a test on me first. Make sure I'm not infected." John rolled up his sleeve and extended his arm to the confused doctor.

"If you were infected, John, you'd show symptoms, and clearly you aren't. What is this all about?"

John told him about the rock he'd found, of how it broke and bled, then dried in seconds leaving no residue, and how he had sent it to his daughter. Liam could see the panic spreading across John's face.

"Can you please get Nico's body into the infirmary? I'll be here a while. I want to put your mind at ease and do this research."

John couldn't stop thinking about his family. He took the gurney roughly and wheeled it into the infirmary, leaving it in the middle of the room. John's need to reach his family was becoming urgent. He raced to his quarters and used the softphone, a communications device that managed the long-distance calls from space to Earth via computer. Over the years it had been upgraded to the Softphone Deluxe3000. Before calling his wife Alice, he sent off a second email to the CDC, marking it urgent. He also sent an urgent message to the medical team at NASA informing them of the possible threat.

He then dialed his home number and waited for Alice to answer. When she didn't pick up, he irrationally thought the medical team had already been to his house to collect his wife, his child, and the rock. Rationally, he realized it was impossible, so he tried again. By his calculations, it was only 4:00 pm back on Earth. He wondered where she could be. Then he remembered they would only have arrived back from Australia two hours earlier and she was most likely out buying essentials. He tried again, and she finally picked up.

"Babe, what took you so long? Is everything all right?"

"Yes, honey, everything's fine. I was just getting back out of the car. We were going to go grocery shopping, but Lucy started to complain that she

was tired. I think the long flight has just tuckered her out and she's probably hungry. She'll be having a very early night tonight. I think I will too."

"Oh! God, is she okay?"

"She is. Is everything all right with you, John? You look panicked."

"It's all good, sweetie. Is your mother okay? Did you receive the package I sent?"

"Yes, Mom will be fine. It turned out to be angina. I got her settled back with Dad and we spent time with them both. It was nice. Lucy had a ball. Yes, we got the rocks and I gave them to Lucy. She hasn't opened the box. I took a peek inside and they look pretty. She said she'd wait till the morning. She's very tired. I think we both are. Fourteen-hour flights will do that. Honey, tell me what is wrong?"

"I don't want to alarm you, but there might be something wrong with the rocks. It is best you don't remove them from the box. I'm relieved to hear that neither you nor Lucy have. You haven't touched the rocks, have you? I need you to box it back up. Can you do that for me? I've already sent an email to the medical staff at NASA, and the infectious disease people at CDC have also been notified. They will be sending someone out to get you both." John felt sick and was unable to hide the worry from Alice.

"What the hell? You're really scaring me now. I promise you we didn't touch the rocks. Are we infected with something? You've got to be more specific, otherwise I'm going to be worried sick. Should I be worried?"

"Alice, darling, I wish I had the answers for you. But I don't. I'm working on a theory and I pray to God that I'm wrong. But for precautionary measures, I need to know that you and Lucy are safe. Which now I've talked to you, I'm confident that you both are." John could hear Lucy in the background demanding to talk to him, but he couldn't see her on the monitor.

There was a slight pause before signals caught up with each other. When they did, Lucy was sitting on Alice's knee waving hello. John looked her over and a sense of sadness rushed over him. He didn't want Lucy or Alice to see, so he diverted his fears into a fun joke.

"Hello, precious. I have a joke for you. What do elves learn in school?"

"I dunno, Daddy, what?"

"The elf-abet."

John watched his little girl's face beam into a beautiful smile and giggle. John relished in her giggling and locked the memory in his heart.

There was another long pause before the monitor caught up with the signals. John put his index finger to the screen and held it there. Lucy copied him, playing a game of trace the finger around the screen.

“I have to go now. Be a good girl for Mommy.”

“I will, Daddy.” Lucy blew John a kiss, got down off Alice’s lap, and rushed off to watch the television.

“John, I’m scared, I think you’re hiding something. Hell, you wouldn’t have called the CDC unless you had good reason. So, before you end this call, I have a right to know.”

“Okay, babe. I’ll level with you. I wouldn’t just call them if it weren’t for a good reason. In this case, I assure you it’s precautionary. The person who has been ill, may not have contracted anything from that rock. I’m being overprotective and covering every base. If it puts your mind at ease, I handled that rock. I found it, touched it, and here I am now, fine and healthy. Trust me, this is solely preventative.”

“All right... I trust you. Just don’t scare me like that. I love you,” Alice said, as a tear streamed down her cheek.

John felt ill and hated the situation, but he had to remain strong. He couldn’t let Alice know how deeply concerned he really was. He blew Alice a lingering kiss and said his goodbyes.

With a heavy sigh, John replaced the Softphone and retreated to the control room.

Deadlock

Roger had taken back the controls of the craft. The repairs to the engine were taking longer than he wanted. He clenched his fist and a vein bulged out on the side of his neck. He swung his arm forward, striking the panel in front of him, angered at the delay.

"Great, you're back, John. What's going on in Medical?" Roger grew alarmed at John's sad-eyed, brooding look.

In an attempt to hide his emotions, John tilted his head down and cast his eyes to the steel floor to avoid making eye contact with Roger. "There is no easy way to say this. Nico has died."

"Holy shit! What happened? Did something fall on him? Was it an accident? How'd he die?"

John felt bombarded. He tried to formulate an answer. He kept his head down and answered with a troubled voice, all low, sad tones like the agonizing grief of a cello. "At this stage, Liam thinks he was exposed to something foreign. He is looking into what that might be and will inform me when he knows. Then, if it is a contagion, we can all work on how to deal with it."

"I hope it isn't anything we need to worry about. Is it?" Roger held a strong gaze at John, but John kept his head down a moment longer and didn't see.

John finally lifted his head and made eye contact. "I don't know at this time."

Roger studied John's features, underneath his otherwise charming exterior he held a secret, he was sure of it. "John, what aren't you telling me?"

"If I had more information to tell you, I would. Right now, I'm just as much in the dark as what you are." John gave Roger a gentle squeeze on his right shoulder and then turned to face the controls.

"I won't pressure you for answers you can't give," Roger said. "I know how close you and Nico were." Roger shifted in his chair. Roger felt that John wasn't being truthful. It loomed over him like a storm cloud, one he wasn't able to fully shake off. He told himself that he would investigate things when he got the first chance.

John felt a tug of emotions, but he had to remain focused. He struggled with a string of uncertainties. His mind fired multiple scenarios and questions at him; his wife, his daughter, his best friend, the safety of the crew. The trauma of seeing Nico and the images that produced made him feel physically ill.

"We need to get this ship in order," John said. "Have you sent a distress call out?"

"Not yet," Roger said. "I was waiting on another report from Athena. Lucas and Travis have been working on the engine. They sealed off the visible hole, but it was still leaking fuel."

"Athena, report in," John ordered.

"Nothing has changed, Captain Lancaster. The engines are still inoperable."

John picked up the transceiver from the panel, which gave a direct line to the engine room. He waited for Travis or Lucas to answer. When they didn't, he tried again. "Roger, I thought you said Lucas and Travis were in the engine room?" John didn't wait for an answer. He turned to Athena. "Athena, check the engine room now."

"They are. They have not left." Athena confirmed.

John's lips parted slightly and his eyes darkened with a mix of alarm and urgency. "Roger, go and check on them. Athena, send out a distress call to both NASA and to Sol. We need another craft to pick us up."

John checked the fuel gages. He shook his head at the rate of dumped fuel. They were down below a quarter on one tank, three quarters on another and the third tank was just over half full. Without fuel, warp drive wasn't possible. Without the fuel, they would find themselves drifting in space. Without power, the location beacon wouldn't transmit. There wouldn't be any hope of NASA or Sol rescuing them. John listened to Athena's distress message. With any luck, the call would be heard, and someone would be on the way to help before the power gave out. Worst case scenario, they had the escape pods. He had a contingency plan to get his crew off the ship.

Roger decided to swing by his quarters on the way to the engine room. He needed to talk to his wife. John was hiding more information than he cared to share. Between Nico's unexplained death and the ship's damaged engines, he was anxious. He had to talk to his wife, Phoebe. He tossed his baseball hat on the bed before picking up the ship's Softphone. He was

upset when Phoebe didn't answer. He sat at the edge of his bed. The adrenaline high he had been on from the control room to his bunk was subsiding. He lay back on the bunk and drifted off.

He was jolted awake by the feeling of something crawling across his chest. He leaped off the bed, swiping frantically at his torso. His eyes caught a glimpse of something black as it scurried under the bed. He got on his knees, but couldn't locate whatever it was. Roger jumped and hit his head on the bed when he felt something bite his ankle. He groaned in pain and slid out enough to turn around.

He could see a trickle of blood from his ankle dripping under his leg. The pain was intense. He scanned the area around him for the culprit, but couldn't see anything. He rocked back and forth holding his leg. Something foreign, and apparently hostile, was on board the ship. "Aliens," he murmured. Out of nowhere, at lightning speed, the black thing he saw earlier slithered across his right leg and bit straight through his pants, into his thigh just above the knee. He grabbed at it, but it was too slippery. He watched in terror as it burrowed in. His skin morphed as the thing slithered around under his skin. He grabbed at his leg. The pain was excruciating as it drilled down deeper and deeper. Roger screamed out in horrific agony until he passed out. No one heard his cries.

He woke up a half an hour later to a pounding on his door. Roger tried to call out, but his throat felt raw.

Back in the control room, John picked up the receiver and called down to the engine room. No one answered. "Athena, check to see if Roger went to the engine room?"

"Roger has been in his quarters for the past forty-five minutes."

"Keep trying to contact Travis or Lucas. I'm going to check on Roger." He hurried toward Roger's room. He pounded on the door, but there was no response. He did this several times before he heard a faint reply.

"Co... Com... Come in."

"Can't, it's locked. Are you okay?" John's voice echoed through the locked door.

"No... get the... doctor."

"On it," John said with urgency.

John returned with Liam and Sam in tow. Sam punched in an override code and unlocked Roger's door. Roger was lying on splatters of blood.

Parts of his skin were waxy with visible holes. *Just like Nico's*, thought John.

"Back up," John ordered. He quickly shut the door. "Dammit, not again." He dropped his hand to his hip and realized he'd left his gun in his quarters. "No one enters until we have done a full sweep of that room."

"Roger's in pain, he could die," Liam stressed, with a shake in his voice. Conflicted with wanting to save Roger and yet at the same time wanting to get the hell off the ship. His left eye started twitching again. He rubbed it and it only seemed to aggravate it more.

"Captain's order's. No one goes in until I have given the okay. I'll be right back," John said. While running down the corridor, he reached his quarters, entered and retrieved the weapon. He raced back and had a bewildered Sam open the door.

"No one in but me." John said, slipping inside of Roger's room. He hovered by the door for a minute, then turned the entire room upside down. He paused a few times when he heard Roger moaning. When he was sure the room was clean, he let the others in."

"There you go Liam, your answer is here. That thing inside of Nico is clearly out!" John said.

Sam was irritated. Liam refused to talk to him, no one was answering his questions.

"What the hell did this, Doc?" Sam questioned anxiously, as he trailed behind Liam and John carrying Roger to the med bay. Sam's irritation grew when again he was ignored.

"Hey, where are you guys going? What's wrong with Roger? Is the ship fixed yet?" Paul called out, catching up to the others. His face was lined with sheet marks. "Hey, stop for a second, tell me what's going on," he said, through a yawn and stretch.

John abruptly stopped, which forced Liam to stop. John carefully turned his head, just enough to see Paul. "I see you've been napping again?"

"Yeah, nothing else to do. After I cleaned up, everyone was busy fixing the ship. Is it ready? Why aren't we moving, and what is wrong with Roger?" Paul said, while scratching his chin.

"Aliens, I think," Sam blurted, then added," They aren't telling me anything."

Neither John nor Liam answered for a moment, both of them stood still holding Roger's body; John had his legs, Liam held under Roger's armpits.

They looked at each other. John could see Liam was about to burst into full-on explanation. They didn't have time for any of it. Roger was getting heavy and all John wanted to do was get him to Medical.

"Listen, Paul, the ship's not fixed and we do have a breech. I need you to do a sweep on this level, and if you see anything suspicious, report back to me."

"Wait, what am I looking for exactly?"

"You'll know it when you see it. Just don't touch it. Don't get close and get yourself a weapon," John said, sternly. He started out and Liam continued forward.

"Fine. I might be the damn cook, but do I really gotta deal with all the sloppy jobs. I'm not a soldier. I'm just a *cook*!" Paul whined as he trudged off to weapons bay and armed himself. He hoped to bump into Bridgette, an urge stirred in his groin at the thought of her and a smile filled his face. "Aliens! They gotta ruin everything. I was so close to getting Bridgette to say yes. I know she loves me. *I just know it.*"

"Come on, Captain," Sam said. "I have a right to know more than what you told Paul. What is going on?"

"Yes, Sam, you do." John turned and looked right into Sam's eyes. "It appears we have an alien hitchhiker. Liam is still researching the particular species." John and Liam put Roger's body on the cot in Medical.

Liam rubbed his eyes and then looked at Sam. "I can tell you this much, it's a parasite. When it infected Nico, it appears to have unleashed something far more advanced and sinister. I found reference to it from another mission's records. The more I read about this parasite the more I'm positive that this is what killed Nico."

"Is it airborne or what?" Sam quizzed worriedly.

"No. From the data I've read, it starts out as a liquid from within a rock. It penetrates the skin through a cut. Then it feasts on the organs, like a leech, until it multiplies. Nico, the poor soul, was the first host. From him to Roger. Each time gaining a growth rate like nothing we've ever seen. With each new host it will continue to grow bigger and more aggressive. Until it no longer needs a host. At which stage it then just kills for the sake of killing."

Sam turned to face John, his face pale and his voice shaky. "Holy hell... John, what are we going to do?"

“Stick to protocols and we’ll be okay. I was on my way down to the engine room when I found Roger. I need you to get down there and find out what is going on.”

Sam gave John a quick nod and raced off. It didn’t take him long to reach the engine room. He was greeted by sparks coming from exposed wires that flailed and twisted around like hissing snakes at the doorway. Unable to see anything more, he tentatively paced forward.

“Travis... Lucas... are you here?”

He only got about three feet in before he heard the sizzling and hissing of more exposed wires up ahead. He was about to take another step when he noticed the liquid on the floor. Fuel! A spark from the frayed wires could send the ship up in flames. He rushed to the wall panel and flipped the power switch, plunging the area into total darkness. In a matter of seconds, the emergency lighting came on. It illuminated the area in a red glow.

He carefully inspected the room for any other exposed live-wires that might be a threat. When he was certain that things were clear, he started to search for his shipmates. He tripped over Lucas’s lifeless body. He fell spread out over Lucas’s cold, pale form. He scurried away from the body. The skin was taut, and the lips frozen in an open scream. Sam couldn’t look away from that face with its dead eyes staring at him. He hesitantly reached over and closed Lucas’s eyelids. He stood squinting in the dim light. He saw a silhouette of a body across the wall in front of him. He wasn’t sure if it was human or alien. He breathed heavily, willing his quivering body forward. He started to breathe faster as his feet found the courage to walk slowly ahead. A foot away and he realized it was Travis. He let out a large gulp of air that he had not realized he was holding. He carefully maneuvered around, stepping over fallen metal and other debris to get to his shipmate. With a deep sigh, he discovered that Travis was also dead.

Sam kicked himself for not having grabbed a weapon. He hadn’t signed up for this. This was supposed to be an exploratory mission, not a first-contact event. Knowing none of them had training for such an encounter. He felt as though his balls had been hit by a bat. A noise brought his mind back to the room around him. He stood up, frantically searching. He could hear scuttling along the back wall under the machinery. He had to get out of there. Without a weapon he wasn’t about to go alien hunting. He retreated, closed and locked the door.

Back in the med bay, Liam gave Roger a sedative. Once he was asleep, the doctor went to work.

"Can I be of assistance, Liam?" Bridgette asked, over the commlink to the isolated room.

Liam looked Bridgette right in the eyes, through the glass doors. "If you feel like stitching up, I can get back to my research."

Bridgette nodded and asked, "Is it the same thing that happened to Nico?"

"Did John fill you in?"

"John told us that Nico died, but not how. Is it?" Bridgette went straight for the hazmat suits.

"No need for the suit, he isn't contagious."

"I haven't had time to finalize my tests," Liam said. *Stuff protocol*. "Look, we are all in danger. There is a parasite, maybe several parasites, loose on the ship. Whatever bit Roger could still be inside of him right now. Or it could have already exited out of those wounds you are stitching up. I've done what I can, but at this point I don't know what to do." Liam wanted to scream.

Bridgette felt an urge to jump back, and leave. She said, "Well, we need to get smarter than this... I say we dump the bodies in space. If you can't stop what is inside Roger, then we are all in line to becoming this damn creature's host!" Bridgette cautiously removed the bandage from Roger's leg to stitch it up.

Liam nodded in agreement, but his face was knotted in anger. "Floating people into space is not an option. I swore to protect life. If you can't work calmly, then you need to leave." He took a deep breath. "Maybe with a bit more knowledge you'll understand. From the research I've read, and the data I've collected, it is clear that the incubation of the alien parasite within the host is not contagious. I remembered reading about a case on Tridentol that sounded very similar to what is happening here. The alien is small, it has no legs, no arms and resembles a black blob with teeth. It hides. It can go anywhere without any of us seeing it. The article went on to say that it was a highly intelligent species that can destroy an entire planet in one month of being freed from its original host. They never found a way to kill it."

Bridgette could hear and almost feel the vibration of Liam's fear.

Before he moved away, he added, “Tell me, Bridgette, how the hell do we find something when it hides in the vents and can crawl faster than we can blink?”

Bridgette looked at Liam with shock. He’d told her to *calm down*? “It sounds like you have already thrown in the towel, Liam.”

“This is a dire situation. We both know how hostile aliens can be.” Liam mopped his sweat-drenched face with a towel. “Our lives are at risk. I’m terrified. You should be too. I’ve been researching about this particular parasite since Nico died, comparing notes, studying his blood for clues. Now, I need to compare his with Roger’s. This shit isn’t what I signed up for. It’s out of my pay grade. So, forgive me for being a little passive-aggressive. I think we are both on edge, and I suggest we *both* chill out,” Liam sat down at his desk and looked at Nico’s and Roger’s blood, comparing them side by side with the data collected from Planet Tridentol. An hour passed. He was no closer to an answer than when he’d started. He hadn’t even heard Bridgette leave.

Dead Reckoning

“Athena, can you find John, and see if you can patch me in, somehow?” Sam asked. “Can you override the intercom?”

“I will do my best. I believe Captain Lancaster requested you fix the intercom. Do you need help with that?”

“Just find a way to get John’s attention,” Sam said, in irritation. “We’ll worry about the intercom system later.”

“Very well, Sam.”

Sam was unable to sit still. His left leg bounced up and down as his finger beat a tattoo on the control panel.

“I have located John for you, Sam. I’ll patch you through now. He won’t be able to answer you, but he will hear you.”

“John, you are needed urgently in the control room,” Sam said, while pacing the bridge. “I repeat, report to the control room ASAP!”

Upon entering the room, John was shocked to see the state of Sam. He was pale and his face was slick with sweat. His hands were black with soot. He was pacing the area in front of the large glass windows.

“What is it, Sam?” John asked.

“Lucas, and Travis. They’re both dead.”

“Crap! Did something go wrong in the engine room? Don’t say it was aliens. Don’t say it!” John tried to keep composed, but he knew he was failing dismally.

Sam fiddled with his hands, interlocking them into one another while he paced on the spot. “Alien. They have the same wounds on their bodies as Roger and Nico, only bigger. The damn engine room was a mess. I had to cut the power because of live wires. The decking is covered with fuel. Those sparks could have ignited it and we would have been toast.” He indicated the explosion with a spread of his hands.

John looked around the bridge, blankly staring at the empty seats. With no one to fix the engines, it was time they made plans to abandon the ship. His thoughts turned to that task and the remaining members of his crew, Bridgette and Paul. “You’ve done a great job, Sam. Now, I need you to do one more. I need you to assist the doctor. Have you seen either Paul or Bridgette?”

“No. Haven’t seen anyone.”

“Change of plans. Go find Paul. He should have reported back by now, but with the intercom down, who knows what he might have run into. Dammit!”

Sam rolled his eyes and then gave John a nod.

“Get yourself a weapon first. You know where they are.”

“Roger that.” Sam went straight to the armory and took out a pulse rifle.

Using the coms, John tried to call the remainder of his crew, but all he got was static interference.

“Athena, did you manage a workaround with the coms?” John asked.

“I have fixed it so that you can broadcast a message. Your crew will hear you, but they won’t be able to respond.”

“Thanks, Athena.” John put out his message to the remainder of his crew. “Paul... Bridgette... Doc... Come to the control room immediately.” He was about to give the order again when Bridgette arrived. She held a taser in her right hand and a Colt .45 in the other. She stomped over to John and swiftly kicked his ankle, hard.

“What the hell was that for?”

“You are the worst captain ever! You are supposed to let us know about alien life forms infiltrating our ship. I had to hear it from Liam. You should have called a briefing. You deserve more than a damned kick to your shin.” Bridgette did everything she could to stop herself from aiming her weapon at John.

He was so taken aback he spoke with a stutter. “I... I... I wanted to be sure first. I didn’t need the crew in a panic when the ship needed attention.”

“You can make all the excuses you want, John. Captain or not, you’ve not followed standard procedures and now people are dead. That’s on you!” She hissed at him, with a scolding look of anger and disappointment.

“I screwed up. Take it up with the director when we get home. We have to get off this ship. While I’m still Captain, you will hold that anger of yours and listen to my orders. I can have you written up for insubordination.”

“I’d like to see you try,” she snapped. “Where the hell is everyone else?”

“Still waiting. Sam has gone on the hunt for Paul. Athena said you were with Liam, where is he?”

“He said he’d be here in half an hour. He’s locked himself in his lab to finish his research on our intruder. What is the plan, John?” Bridgette

struggled to keep her composure. She hated being so filled with anger.

“When Sam returns, you will go with him to the escape pods. Get yourselves off this ship. Am I clear?”

“Yes... gladly... and do not take this as me giving a crap about you, but setting your stupidities aside, what about you and Liam?”

John had known Bridgette for ten years. He knew she cared about him, and though he’d royally screwed up, they were both under an enormous burden of stress. He knew this feud between them would blow over. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll see to it that Liam is on a pod.”

“Roger that, Captain.” In a tense motion Bridgette took her seat, placing her weapons on the panel in front of her. However, agitation had her up and pacing the bridge.

“Go easy on that pacing. I don’t need any more holes in my ship,” John said, hoping to lighten the mood.

She briefly paused and glanced up at John. “I can’t just sit on my ass. I have to do something.” She carried on pacing.

John couldn’t look at her without feeling guilty. He was determined to get everyone home. At least, everyone left alive on the ship.

“I’m going to see Liam. He needs to gather his data and be ready to leave.” John didn’t wait for a reply. He was out the door and heading straight for Medical.

Trapped

Paul systematically searched, checking each living quarters. With the crew of nine there wasn't anything to see in the empty quarters. Still, he wanted to be thorough. Though his mind continued to think about Bridgette. He reached the mess and entered. He had fond memories of this area. The crew had spent a lot of time traveling and the mess was usually filled with laughter, poker playing, teasing Bridgette, playing on the pinball machine, and beating Roger's high score. A noise above his head startled him from his fond memories. He scanned the vent above his head. He stuffed the gun into the waistband of his jeans, grabbed a chair, placed it directly underneath, and pushed open the panel. It made a loud, echoing thud as it landed on the steel panel on the other side. He listened intently, waiting for the sound to repeat. When it didn't, he reached his arms up, hooked his fingers into the opening and hoisted himself up. Unable to see anything he lowered himself down and hunted through the room for a flashlight. He found one in one of the drawers. He climbed back on the chair, using his chin to hold the flashlight to his chest. With both his hands on the inside of the vent, he lifted himself up enough to rest his left elbow on one side and grab the flashlight with his right hand. He turned it on and shone the light in every direction. He stayed perfectly still and listened. Somewhere in the distance he could hear a kind of squelching slithering.

"Got ya now, you sonofabitch." He laid the flashlight down and rolled it a few feet in. He heaved his body all the way up until he was able to use his knees to push himself forward, his hip landed on the torch and he let out a winded sound. He lowered his arm and wormed his body into the small space until he could grab the light. When he did, he brought it forward and shone it ahead. He got on his hands and knees and crawled forward. When he came to a fork, he looked both ways and listened intently. The sound was coming from the right. He reached down and pulled the gun from his waistband with his right and found he couldn't hold the flashlight and gun in the same hand. He used his left for the flashlight and found he no longer had means to push himself forward. Frustrated, he tucked the gun back into his pants. He felt as though he was on a suicide mission. With no room to turn around, he had no choice but to crawl backward. He abruptly stopped and recalibrated where he would be. At a guess, he placed himself

somewhere close to the kitchen. Being very familiar with the kitchen, he knew of an access to the vent above the grill. Instead of going right, he went left toward the kitchen. Leaving the noise he'd heard in the other direction. With a sigh of relief, he hastily pressed on.

With each rapid movement he made he clanked the flashlight along the duct's floor. The sound inadvertently spooked him. He stopped, looking ahead, and for a moment he thought he had passed the kitchen's access point. Confused, he scratched his head. The action created an unexpected shadow on the wall of the duct. Paul was startled until he realized it was his own shadow. Then he chuckled nervously to himself and moved on. Everything had him unnerved. His knees and hands were aching, desperately he wanted to be in the kitchen, to stand up and give respite to his aching joints. A few feet from the kitchen, he thought he heard something and paused; straining his ears over the soft humming of the ship's air conditioning, he intently listened.

Nothing came at him from the front and he started to feel stupid again, hearing noises that weren't there. He picked up his pace and maneuvered forward. Suddenly, a painful sting penetrated his right leg and shot up into his lower back. He kicked his knees out and fell onto his belly. With his stomach flush to the floor he rolled onto his side. He waved the flashlight wildly at his legs, madly trying to free the gun from his pants. The light silhouetted his body across the wall and it terrified him. He could feel his leg being opened up. Slowly, he shone the light down his leg, inch-by-inch until he was almost at the ankle.

That's when he saw it. A dark shape wriggling through his torn pants. It had started to vanish inside his leg. The light caught the ass-end of it before it was completely gone. The excruciating pain penetrated deep into his leg. He thought he might pass out. He bit down on his bottom lip while twisting his body and used all of his stomach muscles to bend himself over enough to hit his leg with the flashlight. It was a futile attempt. He wiggled around and pulled the gun free from his jeans, only to drop it when the creature dug inside his flesh. The pain was so intense he almost chipped a tooth when he bit down, gnashing his bottom and top teeth together. Even the noise of that terrified him. The alien went another layer deeper, before ascending inside his leg. Automatically, Paul's body protested, and his leg jerked out and struck the side panel of the duct. The sound vibrated around him; a chilling echo in his ears that only made him panic more.

When he saw two more aliens coming at him, his lungs constricted, and he felt hot bile rising to the back of his throat. In a panic, he tried to move, but banged his head on the ductwork ceiling. As the one in front got closer, he tossed the flashlight at it. He madly felt around for his gun and screamed when he couldn't find it. The glow from his flashlight illuminated the two coming for him. He gulped in rapid succession, drying out his throat which made it hard for him to swallow his own spit. One minute it was 10 feet from him and the next it was closing in and he was trapped. The alien from the front was suddenly on him. It latched onto his face, covering his nose and mouth. He tried to grab at it, but it was too strong and slippery. He couldn't maintain a hold of it. The alien pierced his nose and Paul's mouth opened into a scream, allowing the creature an easier way in. His scream locked at the back of his throat. The only sound that emerged was a muffled grunt. He choked convulsively, feeling the alien slide down his throat. He bit down hard, catching some of it in his back teeth. The taste was so bitter that regurgitation shot up his esophagus. With the creature in the way, his spew got stuck in his throat. Paul didn't die from the alien's invasive maneuvers. He asphyxiated on his own puke.

Search and Destroy

Sam passed the infirmary in search of Paul. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the gurney with the body bag, and shivered. He walked up to the large window and peered directly at the lifeless bag. His finger twitched on the pulse-rifle's trigger. He felt the sharpness of gooseflesh prick at the base of his neck and a cold shudder shot down the back of his spine. He knew Nico was in it and he wondered how soon it would be before Roger's body would be as well. He was suddenly terrified of the aliens. He had been holding his emotions in check, but seeing the body bag brought all the anger, fear, and sadness to the surface. His heart began to race, and his palms turned sweaty. Where could Paul be? He had to find him before they lost another member of the crew.

His stomach grumbled, not once, but three times. It brought his thoughts back into focus. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten. There hadn't been time to think, much less eat.

After checking all of the rooms on the level Paul was supposedly searching, he entered the mess room and quickly noticed the odd placement of the chair. His eyes scanned around and then upward, spying the open vent. He swung the pulse-rifle over his shoulder and stood on the chair. He hoisted himself up to take a look. Unable to see anything, he listened. No sounds. No signs of Paul. He called out Paul's name and waited. After a few minutes went by, his growling stomach became relentless. It was distracting him. He climbed off the chair and made his way to the kitchen, being mindful of every nook and cranny that the alien could be hiding in.

Inside the kitchen, he had a quick glance around, then made his way to the fridge and was bitterly disappointed to find it nearly empty. On one of the shelves he removed a premade bag of pureed beef, at least he thought it was. He tore open the packet, put it to his nose and inhaled. With a shrug of his shoulders, he turned the packet up and squeezed the contents into his mouth. With his head tilted back, he closed his eyes and imagined he was eating roast pork with crackling, duck-fried potatoes and steamed green beans. He squirted the rest of the contents into his mouth, crumpled the bag, and tossed it into a nearby sink.

He swiped at his forehead when he felt something wet. Still hungry, he started to search the cupboards and noticed his fingers were stained red.

Upon a closer look and with a hard sniff, he thought it was blood. To make sure he ran his tongue across the top of one finger and tasted it. “Yep, that’s blood all right.” He wiped his forehead again and got a tiny smear across the tips of three fingers, but he could not feel anything that would cause his head to bleed. He walked to the grill and removed a stainless-steel, hanging pot, turned it upside down and looked into the bottom at his reflection. He couldn’t see any scrapes or cuts. Confused, he slowly surveyed the area. Looking up, he noticed the darkened area of the ceiling. He moved closer and was able to see the dripping blood clearly.

Sam searched the ceiling until he found the ventilation hatch above the grill. He hopped onto the bench and from there to the stove. It was a massive stove, built strong enough to hold his weight. Standing on it, he reached up and pushed the hatch open. Grabbing the inside, he lifted himself into the small area and called for Paul. He couldn’t see anything, slid himself back out, and got off the grill. He found a flashlight in the third drawer he looked in. He went back to investigate through the vent. He fell out when his light panned across Paul’s body. Grabbing his gun, he felt his heart quicken and beads of sweat trickle down his head. He set his fears aside to double-check what he’d seen. This time he crawled into the ductwork and shone the light on Paul’s corpse. Sam got close enough to grab Paul and drag him back out of the duct. He pulled, pushed and yanked until he got Paul’s arms dangling out of the hole. When Sam was fully out, and still standing on the stove, he reached up and took ahold of Paul’s hands and pulled hard. Ducking out of the way as Paul’s body fell to the top of the grill with a heavy thud, Sam jumped off and stood on the floor eyeballing his crewmate’s lifeless frame. He could see where the creatures had exited Paul’s body. An awful shudder ran down Sam’s back. In a panic, he looked back up and feared the aliens were still there and would pounce on him. He removed his finger from the trigger of his pulse-rifle when he felt trigger-happy. Not wanting to blast holes in the ship, he stumbled back, almost tripping when his leg collided with the drawer he’d left open.

“Dammit, Paul. Why did ya go up there, man?” Sam knew he’d never hear the answer. He found himself studying Paul’s body as if he was frozen in time studying some long-lost, treasured artifacts at a museum. He couldn’t look away. Finally, he shook his head and tried to gather his thoughts.

He blankly looked at the wall-mounted speaker and wanted to kick himself for not having fixed the intercom. He had to alert John of Paul's death. And that the aliens might still be in the area. Frustration got the better of him as he realized a working intercom would have shaved minutes off his current situation. He pulled himself together and started out, only to turn around gun aimed, when a sound caught his attention. He spun on his heels, madly eyeing the room, taking it all in too fast as he continued to spin in a circle. Dizzy, he stopped and held his breath for a few seconds, before exhaling through his nose. The released air exiting from his nostrils sounded like a walrus snoring. He was facing the door when glass jars behind him clinked into one another as if a ghost had brushed up against them.

He dug deep down, pulled out a shield of bravery, and started to yell, "Show yourself, you sonofabitch!" He waited as if he expected the thing to answer. Sam almost gave up and left when he saw it slithering towards him. He raised his gun, ready to blast it to kingdom come, when suddenly he lowered it, when an idea struck him. "Got you now!" Swiftly, he lunged at it, hitting it with the butt of his rifle. "Got ya!" he yelled over and over. With the heavy force of his gun, he ended up killing it. "Crap! I wanted it alive. Why did I have to use so much force?" His thoughts raced around in his head, and another idea came to him. He got to his feet and snatched a large jar from the shelf and then a spatula. He slid the creature into the jar and twisted the lid on tightly. He bolted from the kitchen and ran all the way to the control room.

Relentless

Sam held up the jar for Bridgette to see and then asked her, “Where is John?”

“He went to med bay. Eww, what the hell is that?” Bridgette nervously traced her fingers on the outside of the glass jar. “Is it dead?” She took in the alien’s form and was surprised to see how big it was. Stepping back, she felt the urgent need to get off the ship. Bridgette almost jumped out of her skin when Athena came online.

“Fuel critical. You have twelve minutes before the power goes out. Please get to your escape pods immediately.”

“Thank you, Athena. We’re on it,” Bridgette announced, as she gave Sam a pathetic look of doom.

“It’s dead!” Sam shouted. “Like this damn ship. I’ll get the doctor and John and meet you at the hangar.” He rushed out the door, sprinted down the corridor and down a flight of stairs until he reached the sick bay. Through the window, he saw the doctor in deep discussion with John. Sam held his hand against the door pad. It scanned his palm with a satisfying beep. The doors unlocked and slid open. He rushed in and stuck the jar on the bench right in front of Liam.

“A specimen, in case you need it, and before you ask... yes, it is dead. We, however, have to leave now. The ship’s power is about to go out. Athena has warned us to leave immediately. We’re meeting Bridgette in the hangar. I found Paul and he’s dead. I see by the body bag that Roger didn’t make it.”

“Sam... slow down. We’re leaving,” John said, without a hint of panic.

Sam watched Doctor Liam input a final bit of data before logging out. He handed John the laptop and picked up the jar.

“I thought you said this thing was dead?” His eyes grew wide as he watched the creature start to expand like insulation foam.

“It was. At least, I thought it was. Hell, I must’ve only knocked the sucker out. I wanted to capture it alive so you could study it. Looks like I did. It doesn’t matter, let’s go,” Sam insisted.

John waited by the door with the laptop held tightly in his right hand. Liam put the jar down, as the thing inside expanded further. When he was at the door, standing alongside John and Sam, they all turned when they heard

glass shattering. The creature dropped to the floor with shards of glass poking out of its body. The three men just made it out the door and closed it behind them before the alien slithered up the glass. When it found the barrier between it and the remaining crew, it oozed across the wall and into the vent.

"Christ! That damn thing is relentless. Let's get out of here," John ordered, as he jogged and then began sprinting.

The other two didn't need any prompting. They were already running to the hangar bay. When the power started shutting down, the sirens sounded and a series of orange lights started to flick on and off. An automated voice started a countdown.

"Almost there," John called back to the others.

Three levels down and they made it into the hangar bay. Bridgette was waiting nervously, already wearing her spacesuit and holding her gun in one hand and her helmet in the other.

"Nice to see you made it. Now, can we get the hell out of here?" she asked, inching closer to her escape pod.

Before John could answer her, Sam yelled out, "Look, over there!" His eyes grew wide with terror as he looked at the creature dead on.

The others looked in his direction. Bridgette could feel her gooseflesh rise like towering needles that stabbed at the back of her neck. Her sweaty hands gripped tightly to her gun. She raised it and fired. Missing her target, she watched in horror as the creature morphed into the shape and silhouette of something resembling a human. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. It was like watching a jellyfish being reshaped over and over. The creature went back to its original form when two more joined it.

"Quickly, get inside your pods," John ordered. Dropping the laptop at his feet, he fired his gun repeatedly.

He watched in disbelief as each bullet went right through the creature and out the other side without any visible damage. Liam picked up his laptop and got inside the same pod with Bridgette. He struggled with the seatbelt, but finally managed to fasten it over his bulky spacesuit. Bridgette snapped her helmet on and climbed in. She punched in a series of keystrokes on the small keypad and the craft's engines started. A large door behind her pod opened wide and they were sucked out into space, heading home to Earth. Neither of them noticed the alien that had slithered into the pod with them. It snaked its way under her seat.

“Sam, get into the damn pod now!” screamed John.

Sam struggled swiftly into his suit and snapped the helmet in place. John was seconds behind him. He closed the door manually. He put on his helmet and typed in the coordinates for Earth. When the engines whirled into action, he put on his seatbelt. No sooner had his belt clipped in tightly then the tiny, two-seater pod was sucked out into space. He closed his eyes for a miracle. The trip home would be hard, and he hoped they wouldn’t be hit by asteroids or debris. A tiny smile formed as they got farther away from the ship. His thoughts went to Lucy and Alice. His smile vanished when he received no reply from Bridgette’s pod. He hoped they were just out of range and that nothing more sinister had happened. Pushing all the negative thoughts from his mind, he focused on getting home in one piece.

“I’m coming home,” he said softly.

Epilogue

There was every reason to be concerned about the arrival of aliens on Earth. When Bridgette's pod crashed to Earth, both she and Liam had already been infected. By the time rescuers arrived, the aliens had escaped both Bridgette and Liam's dead bodies and had infected a nearby farmer. That farmer went on to infect his wife, who then infected her coworkers at the elementary school where she worked. It wasn't long before a widespread invasion took place. Everyone was scrambling to be taken to the safety of planet Sol.

Little did they realize that Sol was no longer a safe haven. Humankind had tried to escape the clutches of its own stupidity on Earth and had failed dismally.

The End

Other books by Ellie Douglas

Hounded
Hounded 2
Toxic Desire
The Dead Undone
The Dead Wake Horror Collection Vol 1
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About the Author

Ellie Douglas is an author who currently resides in New Zealand with her husband and four children. As a child, Enid Blyton and Stephen King inspired her love of writing and reading. When she is not writing, she can be found designing one-of-a-kind pre-made book covers. Her passion for creative art led her to become a *talented sought-after* freelance cover artist. In her free time, she enjoys the cinema, spending time with her children, music and dancing, and anything and everything to do with Horror, especially zombies.

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Feel free to email me, author1ellie@gmail.com with any questions you may have about this book or anything at all. I will always reply.

Best wishes.

Ellie Douglas